



***HAEC PORTA DOMINI. EXEGESES OF SOME GREEK
CHURCH FATHERS ON EZEKIEL'S PORTA CLAUSA
(5TH - 10TH CENTURIES)***

***HAEC PORTA DOMINI. EXÉGESIS DE PADRES DE LA IGLESIA
GRIEGA SOBRE LA PORTA CLAUSA DE EZEQUIEL
(SIGLOS V-X)***

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight a large amount of exegeses proposed from 5th to 10th century by many Fathers of the Greek-Eastern Church on the shut gate (*porta clausa*) of the temple revealed to Ezekiel during the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon: a closed door facing East, through which God enters and leaves without opening it, and which, after entering and leaving through it, He left closed forever. Regardless of their respective formulations, all these Christian thinkers agreed on this unanimous interpretation: this Ezekiel's *porta clausa* is a double and complementary metaphor of Christ and Mary, since it is an eloquent dogmatic symbol that means simultaneously the virginal divine maternity of Mary and her perpetual virginity, as well as the supernatural conception and birth of Jesus from the virginal womb of Mary.

Keywords: *Porta clausa*, Ezekiel, Greek Patrology, Mary's divine motherhood, Christ's incarnation..

RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo poner en luz una gran cantidad de exégesis propuestas desde el siglo V al siglo X por muchos Padres de la Iglesia Greco-Oriental sobre la puerta cerrada (*porta clausa*) del templo revelada a Ezequiel durante el exilio del pueblo judío en Babilonia: una puerta cerrada hacia que daba hacia Oriente, por la cual Dios entra y sale sin abrirla, y que, después de entrar y salir por ella, dejó cerrada para siempre. Independientemente de sus formulaciones respectivas, todos estos pensadores cristianos coincidieron en esta interpretación unánime: esta *porta clausa* de Ezequiel es una metáfora doble y complementaria de Cristo y María, pues es un símbolo dogmático elocuente que significa simultáneamente la virginal maternidad divina de María y su virginidad perpetua, así como la concepción sobrenatural y el nacimiento de Jesús del vientre virginal de María.

Palabras clave: *Porta clausa*, Ezequiel, Patrología Griega, maternidad divina de María, encarnación de Cristo.

INTRODUCTION

During his long research into the primary sources of Christian doctrine, the author was discovering with growing surprise the immense amount of exegetical commentaries with which numerous Church Fathers and medieval theologians interpret the eastern door of the temple described by the prophet Ezekiel in his book. This finding led the author to search satisfactory answers to this surprising reiteration and coincidence of those exegeses. The current article is, in fact, a partial result of that search. To give clues to the problem, it is convenient to remember the original narration of the prophet.

Ezekiel refers in his book that, at the 25th year of the captivity of the Jewish people in Babylon, he had a revelation in which Yahweh made him see the Temple to be rebuilt in Jerusalem after the destruction of the previous one. In the context of the detailed description of all parts, measures, ornamentation and ceremonies that would distinguish this future Temple,¹ Ezekiel refers to its eastern gate or portico in these terms:

Then the Lord God brought me back through the east-facing outer gate of the sanctuary. But it was shut. The Lord told me, "This gate is to remain shut. It

1 Ezek. 40-42.

will not be opened. No man is to enter through it, because the Lord God of Israel entered through it, so it is to remain shut.”²

Now well, even if at first glance the prophet's data on this gate facing East are likely factual, nevertheless the Greek and Latin Church Fathers and medieval theologians interpreted from early date this Ezekiel's cryptic text in a double key, Christological and Mariological at the same time. All these Christian thinkers assumed that the mysterious eastern gate revealed to the prophet is a clear symbol of the womb of the Virgin Mary when conceiving and giving birth to God the Son incarnate, while preserving her virginity forever thanks to the divine power. In fact, they interpreted this closed gate with a double Christological and Mariological projection, as a simultaneous and complementary metaphoric figure of both the Virgin Mary's divine maternity and her perpetual virginity, as well as of the supernatural conception and birth of Jesus.

The uncountable patristic and theological exegeses on Ezekiel's *porta clausa* spread over more than a thousand years, since at least the 4th century until the 14th. Nonetheless, this relevant Mariological and Christological interpretation, emphatically asserted by many influential authorities of Christian doctrine, has been surprisingly eluded by some historians of Christianity, especially those experts in Mariology³ and in Marian iconography.⁴ This is also the case, for example, of Fernand Cabrol⁵ and Henri Leclercq⁶ in their monographic entries on the Annunciation in the *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*,⁷ as well as Igino Cecchetti in a similar entry in the *Enciclopedia Cattolica*.⁸

2 Ezek. 44.1-3. Bible, International Standard Version [ISV]. See also Ezek. 44.1-2, in *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam. Nova editio* (Madrid: La Editorial Católica, 2005 [1946]), 847.

3 Among the many authors specialized in Mariology, see, for example, E. Dublanchy, “Marie”, in Cabrol, Leclercq, ed. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1927, Vol. 9/2e), 2.339-2.474; and José Cristo Rey García Paredes, *Mariología* (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 2015).

4 Within the abundant literature on Marian iconography in general, see, for example, Manuel Trens, *Maria. Iconografía de la Virgen en el arte español* (Madrid: Plus Ultra, 1947); Maurice Vloberg, *La Vierge et l'Enfant dans l'art français* (Paris: Arthaud, 1954); Gertrud Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher VerlagHaus, Band 4,2, *Maria*, 1980); Marie-Louise Thérél, *Le triomphe de la Vierge-Église. Sources historiques, littéraires et iconographiques* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1984); Timothy Verdon, *Maria nell'arte europea* (Milano: Electa, 2004).

5 Fernand Cabrol, “Annonciation (Fête de l’)”, in Cabrol, Leclercq, ed. *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne*, 1924, Vol. 1/2e, 2.241-2.255.

6 Henri Leclercq, “L'Annonciation dans l'art”, in *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne*, 1924, Vol. 1/2e, 2.255-2.267.

7 Fernand Cabrol & Henri Leclercq, ed., *Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1924-1954), 12 vols.

8 Igino Cecchetti, “Annunciazione. 1. Nella Scrittura. 2. Nella Liturgia”, in *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (Città del Vaticano: Ente per l'Enciclopedia Cattolica e per il Libro Cattolico, Vol. 1, 1948), 1.382-1.385.

Due to the extraordinarily large amount of Eastern and Western Christian exegeses on Ezekiel's shut door, the author will analyze in the current paper only the exegeses that many Fathers of the Greek-Eastern Church provide between the 5th and 10th centuries on the aforementioned shut door.

I. THE PATRISTIC TRADITION IN THE GREEK-EASTERN CHURCH ON EZEKIEL'S PORTA CLAUSA FROM THE 5TH TO THE 10TH CENTURY

Toward the end of the 5th century or beginning of the 6th the theologian and hymnographer Jacob of Serugh (ca. 451-521), a prestigious writer of hymns and homilies in verse in Syriac, interprets over and over with obsessive insistence the shut eastern gate of Ezekiel in Mariological and Christological sense. Thus, in a homily in honor of Mary, he paraphrases the text of the prophet,⁹ and then says apodictically:

The Virgin Mary is the shut gate of prophecy,
That the Lord Messiah left shut, after joining the world through it.
By going through this gate, the Lord did not open it;
Ezekiel, son of Hebrews, is a witness to this [miracle] together with us.¹⁰

The Syriac bard emphasizes the idea that God entered the world through the gate of the birth (the vulva) by his own will, but leaving well shut the gate of virginity; for, if the sanctuary whose gate Ezekiel saw shut means the Virgin Mary, that implies her virginity not being violated.¹¹ This writer then proclaims that the Messiah is holy, and Mary is his holy House, because the gate truly shut means that she kept intact for ever the signs or seals of her virginity, as seen by Ezekiel: he saw a gate, because through it a man (God the Son incarnate) entered, and he saw it shut because in exiting (at his birth) He did not break the seals of her virginity.¹²

9 Jacobus Sarugensis, *Homilia de sancta Dei Matre et perpetua Virgine*, in Sergio Álvarez Campos, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum* (Burgos: Aldecoa, 1981, Vol. 5), 53.

10 "Virgo Maria porta est clausa vaticinii,
per quam mundum ingressus Messias Dominus clausam reliquit.
Dominus per ianuam transiens non aperit;
testis est nobiscum Ezechiel quoque, filius Hebraeorum." (*Ibid.*, 54).

11 "Per nativitatis portam intravit in mundum Deus, quia voluit;
portamque per virginitatem reliquit oclusam.
Sanctuarium cuius vidit clausam portam propheta

nobis significavit Virginem: ergo virginitas non est soluta." (*Ibid.*).

12 "Sanctus est Messias et domus sanctitatis est Maria;
porta vero clausa indicat servari virginea signa, quae ipsi manent.
Et, si hoc non ita est ut ipse dico,
quare portam vidit propheta et quare clausam?

At once the Sarugensis highlights once more insistently that God the Son came into the world at birth by the gate of the newborns (the maternal vulva), and when exiting He did not open this gate, since He himself foreshadowed his Virgin Mother in the form of a gate splendidly shut, as it was revealed to Ezekiel.¹³ Then he comes on by explaining that, like Jesus in being conceived and giving birth did not open the human gate (the uterus and the vulva), the virginal seal of Mary remains inviolate; the Virgin's womb is explained by the shut gate of Ezekiel, so since this gate is shut, her virginal womb remains sealed.¹⁴

The hymnographer then goes on insisting that, as God said that this gate will not be open any more, and as everyone says that nobody will break the virginal seals, that means that the Word of God sealed the womb of the Blessed Virgin, so that he did not broke the signs of virginity when being conceived or being born. And, for it is God who entered through the Virgin's gate, He did not break the seal or the signs of her virginity, because, as seen by Ezekiel, God himself passed through it and it will remain shut for ever.¹⁵

And shortly after this hymnographer continues by explaining that the gate revealed to Ezekiel as being shut when God passed through it means that God in his divine condition did not open it when passing through it.¹⁶ For this reason, the writer explains:

If someone who was not God should enter through it [this gate]
It would be necessary that it be opened, as he would not be able to enter through it remaining shut.
And, as this gate is truly guarded by the Lord that passes through it,
He himself shut and sealed it, ordering that it will not be opened never more.¹⁷

Portam vidit, quia per portam hominum intravit;
clausam autem vidit, quia exiens virginea non solvit signa.” (*Ibid.*).

13 “Per natorum omnium portam Dei Filius intravit
in mundum per nativitatem, et exiens non aperuit portam.
Et praefiguravit in clausa porta Matrem Virginem,
et Ezechieli monstravit splendide clausam.” (*Ibid.*).

14 *Ibid.*

15 “Hoc est ‘porta haec non aperietur’, quod dixit Dominus;
sicut et omnes dicent ‘nemo signa virginalia dissolvit’.
Verbum Domini signavit sinum beatæ Virginis;
quia nec nascens nec exiens signa ipsius solvit virginea.
Deus erat qui est virgineam portam ingressus,
et cum suis signis reliquit sigillum, quia Deus erat:
non secus porta est quam vidit propheta voce audita:
hoc est: ‘Deus ipse transibit per eam; clausa erit’.” (*Ibid.*).

16 *Ibid.*, 55.

17 “Si alius qui Deus non foret per eam deberet ingredi,
necesse esset ut aperiretur: ipsa non aperta intrare nequiret.
Cum vero sit ea porta Domino ingredienti custodita,

At once, leaving the symbolic dimension, Jacob of Serugh reports that Mary was preserved in inviolable virginity in her childbirth, when giving birth miraculously to God: if she had given birth to a man who was not God, he would have broken the signs of her virginity, which a simple man cannot preserve when being delivered.¹⁸ And some verses later this author persists in these ideas:

It was convenient that she [Mary] remains in virginity,
With which it would be certified who was the father of his Only-Begotten Son.
The Wonder that enlightens us dwelt in a chaste womb;
For, if in exiting [at birth] he violated the seals [of virginity], he would not be the Wonder.
He should enter the world through a shut gate, as it is written;
If, on the contrary, he opened it, he would not be the Lord nor God.¹⁹

And right away the hymnographer goes on saying that, as Christ, wanting to be born actually, safeguarded the signs of his mother's virginity, everyone profess that Jesus is the Lord and the Wonder. So Ezekiel can rejoice for this mother that remained virgin, just the same that he saw as the shut gate through which Christ, sent by the divine Father, came to visit the world, and that, being God the Son, was not opposed in any way by this accessible gate.²⁰

Then, noting some verses later that "the Strong of the centuries [God the Son] entered the world through a shut gate / to pursue tacitly the tyrant [the demon, sin] that devastated the earth",²¹ the Sarugensis clarifies this idea some stanzas later, saying:

The Virgin was pure when the beam of the Father dwelt therein,
And virgin when the child grew in her womb.
The Virgin conceived [carried] the strong that carries the world,
And was a virgin engendering the virtue of the Father.
[...]
Mary is a Virgin and her virginity is eternal.
Blessed be the one who increased the decorum of the pure virgin in childbirth.²²

ipse clausit signavitque edicens se non aperuisse." (*Ibid.*).

18 *Ibid.*

19 "Oportebat eam in virginitate permanere, quo certa foret quis esset Unigeniti sui Pater. In casto sinu habitavit Portentum nos illuminans; si autem egrediens sigilla violasset, non fuisset Portentum. Clausam per portam debebat in mundum intrare, ut est scriptum; si autem reserasset, non esset Dominus ac Deus." (*Ibid.*, 56).

20 *Ibid.*

21 "Fortis saeculorum per oclusam portam in mundum intravit, ut tacite insequeretur tyrannum qui terram vastavit." (*Ibid.*, 59-60).

22 *Ibid.*

Toward the end of the 5th century or beginning of the 6th, Philoxenus of Mabbug, bishop of Hierapolis (ca. 440-523), declares that, as well as the angel Gabriel came down from heaven to earth and, when finding shut the gate of Mary's house, entered through it without opening it, in the same way the Lord Christ came from heaven without damaging anything of the heavenly home (Mary); so that, as well as Gabriel came to the Virgin flying with their wings of spirit, the Lord Jesus lived in her, after coming flying with the wings of the Holy Spirit.²³

At the beginning of the 6th century the Greek monk and theologian St. Severus, Patriarch of Antioch (456-538), says in a homily that the Word of God, exceeding any way, had entered wonderfully and unusually into our world by a divine and royal gate, i.e. by virginity, born in human flesh by means of the power of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mother of God.²⁴

Perhaps for the same years the monk, theologian and aristotelian philosopher Leontius of Byzantium (ca. 485-ca. 543), endorses in a controversial treatise against the Nestorians the dogma of Christian orthodoxy that, being truly shut the gate of the virginity of Mary, the truly natural body of the divine Christ was born to the world through the intact vulva of the Virgin, after the Spirit of the Word inhabited her virginal womb by a supernatural virtue.²⁵ A little later Leontius of Byzantium explains more precisely this thesis when pointing out that, at his spiritual birth by the intact vulva of the Virgin, the Word of God brought about the qualities of his flesh, in the same way that, when entering without flesh by the maternal vulva, he was not compressed; and, having been infused by his goodness in the Virgin when being conceived, He who lacked flesh, was formed fleshly in a divine way of Mary's flesh, and from her he joined the flesh (the human nature) to him (to his divine nature).²⁶

23 "De coelo in terram descendit, et de spiritibus in homines. Exiit ex coelo, et intra portam inventus est quae erat clausa. Portam penetravit non aperiens. Dominus autem processit ex coelo coelestique domo non laedens eorum unum. Processit et volavit angelus per alas spiritus, et adveniens constitit ante Virginem: volavit Dominus quoque eius per alas Spiritus, et adveniens in ea vixit." (Philoxenus Mabbugensis, *De Annuntiatione*, in Álvarez Campos, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, 1981, Vol. 5, 101).

24 "Verbum Patris [...] singulariter, mire, inusitate, omnem excedens modum in nostrum intravit mundum per divinam portam regalemque, per virginitatem scilicet, cum in carne sit ex Spiritu Sancto natus et Virgine Dei Matre". (Severus Antiochenus, *Homilia 63*, in Álvarez Campos, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. 1979, Vol 4/2, 29).

25 "Insuper et vere clausa virginali porta, secundum naturam vere corpus divinae carnis ejus per infractam vulvam venisse, uteri Virginis supernaturali virtute inhabitantis in ea Spiritus Verbi credimus." (Leontius Byzantinus, *Tractatus contra Nestorianos. Liber IV*, 9. PG. 86-1, 1670).

26 "Cum ipsa enim spiritaliter exeundi et prodeundi per infractam Virginis vulvam carni suae Verbum virtutem contulit; sicut ipse sine carne per eam ingrediens non comprimebatur. Cum enim sua

In the year 567 the abbot Theodosius, Archbishop of Alexandria, declares in a sermon that Moses called the Virgin Mary the Meeting Tent in which the dry rod of Aaron flourished for us, Isaias announced the virginal birth of her son Emmanuel, Jeremias called her stem of hazelnut, Ezekiel titled her the gate of the Most High, and Daniel named her the holy mountain of God.²⁷

In the first half of the 6th century the Syrian Romanos the Melodist (ca. 485-ca. 555/562) sets in a poetic hymn a suggestive parallel between two gates, in pointing out that in the Epiphany Mary did open the gate (of her house) and received the procession of the Three Magi, without opening the gate (of her virginity) by which Christ alone entered. She did open the gate of her house to the Magi, she, who was the virginal gate accessible to Christ without being ever stripped of the treasure of chastity, did “open” (in the sense of “allowed access through”) the gate of which the other Gate (of Heaven), who is the eternal God made a new child, was born.²⁸

In another song this poet emphasizes that Jesus Christ was foreshadowed by the prophets by means of several symbolic figures, some prophets calling him the manna and its containing vase, other the flower sprouted from the root, while other appointed the mother of Jesus as the flower, rod, gate that is “open” (in the sense of “accessible”) by the power of the Holy Spirit and remaining shut afterwards, so that it can be said that a virgin gave birth, and after childbirth remains virgin again.²⁹

And finally in another hymn Romanos expresses:

When hearing these things, the immaculate Virgin appeared and went on ahead.
To whom the elderly [Simeon] told her: All the prophets proclaimed to your Son, whom you conceived without semen. A prophet also had cried on you. And he announced the miracle of the fact that you exist as a shut gate, oh Mother of God, since the Lord entered and exited through you, and the gate of your virginal integrity was not open or injured. One who is the only one who

benignitate se in Virginem infundit, ex ipsa qui sine carne erat se carnaliter formavit divino modo, et ab ipsa carnem sibi copulavit.” (*Ibid.*, 1670-1671).

27 Theodosius Alexandrinus, *Sermo quem dixit Pater noster ter beatus Abbas Theodosius*, in Álvarez Campos, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, 1981, Vol 5, 186-190.

28 “Nunc ergo accipe, venerabilis, accipe accipientes me: in illis enim sum tamquam in brachiis tuis. Et a te non recessi, et illis assisto’. Ipsa autem aperit portam et accipit magorum turmam: aperit portam non aperta ianua, quam Christus solus penetravit; aperit portam aperta et (non privata umquam castitatis thesauro. Ipsa aperuit portam ex qua genita est porta, puer novus, ante saecula Deus.” (Romanus Cantor, *Hymnus 10,9*, in Álvarez Campos, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. 1979, vol. 4/2, 137-138).

29 Romanus Cantor, *Hymnus 12,6*, in *Ibid.*, 129-130.

loves men was the only one that entered through you and kept you safe and sound.³⁰

In the second half of the 6th century, the monk Gregory, Patriarch of Antioch († 593), in a sermon on the three women who brought spices to the tomb of Jesus, says about that:

In the same way that He [Jesus] was born while the virginal closures [of Mary] remained shut, so also he rose from the shut tomb: and, as well as the Only-Begotten Son of God was made the firstborn of a mother, so He was also made the firstborn [resurrected] from the dead. Because, as well as at his birth He did not break in any way the virginity of his mother, so when resurrecting He did nor break the seals of the tomb.³¹

And in another sermon on the baptism of Christ, Gregory of Antioch, after indicating that Jesus proceeds from Mary's womb as the bridegroom comes out of his happily nuptial chamber, argues that with his conception He honored the conception of all humans, that at birth He entered the world through the gate of Mary's virginity without breaking her virginal closures, and that after the childbirth He sealed the virginity of his mother.³²

Toward the 6th century an anonymous hymnographer, after stating in a hymn that the Lord showed to prophet Ezekiel a shut gate in the atrium, telling him that it will always be shut because God will pass through it,³³ expresses in another canticle in lyrical terms:

A nuptial chamber was conditioned in the uterus [of Mary], in which the heavenly Bridegroom rested recumbent; the virginal attributes retained their

30 "Audiens haec comparuit et processit Virgo immaculata. Cui senex loquebatur: 'Omnes prophetae Filium tuum proclamarunt, quem sine semine genuisti. De te autem propheta ad haec clamaverat. Et miraculum nuntiavit tamquam porta clausa existas, Deipara. Per te enim et ingressus est et egressus Dominus, neque aperta est nec commota porta integritatis tuae. Te solus penetravit et sanam custodivit ille solus hominum amator'." (Romanus Cantor, *Hymnus 14,9*, in *Ibid.*, 162).

31 "Quemadmodum enim natus est clausis virginalibus claustris, ita et resurrexit clauso sepulcro: ac sicut Unigenitus Dei Filius, primogenitus factus est ex matre, ita resurgens, factus primogenitus ex mortuis. Sicut ergo natus, haudquaquam matris virginitatem solvit, ita nec resurgens solvit signacula sepulcri." (Gregorius Antiochenus, *Oratio in mulieres unguentiferas*, 10. PG 88, 1859-1862).

32 "Hic est qui de beato ventre processit, tanquam ex thalamo virginali sponsus hilaris; qui generatione sua generationem terrigenarum honoravit, partuque virginitatis parentis suae obsignavit: qui per virginitatis januam in mundum ingressus, a quo numquam abfuerat, integritatis claustra non fregit." (Gregorius Antiochenus, *De Baptismo Christi Sermo II*. PG 88, 1875).

33 "Ostendit Dominus prophetae in atriis portam clausam et dixit ei: 'Haec clausa erit, quia Deus ingreditur per eam (Ez. 14,1-2)'." (Anonimus hymnographus, *Hymnus 4,13*, in Álvarez Campos, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*. 1981, Vol. 5, 160-161).

gates with diligent custody. But, when the glorious husband wanted to leave, He left the virginal attributes overcome by sleep so they did not feel his exit.³⁴

In another hymn this unknown poet, after proclaiming that today Ezekiel must rejoice, for his prophecy about the shut gate through which the Lord would pass was fulfilled completely, wishes to explain that Mary is this shut gate, since Christ entered through it to the world and He did not open it.³⁵

In the first decades of the 7th century the Byzantine poet George of Pisida († 641) says that men saw the bridal seal of the miraculous birth of Christ, or better said, the mystic key of the gate that allowed God to exit, into which the Word entered without flesh, and from which, exiting already with flesh (incarnate), he kept well shut and sealed this gate, as He had found it.³⁶

Toward the middle of the 7th century the hagiographer and bishop Leontios of Neapolis (ca. 600-ca. 670), speaking on the presentation of Jesus in the temple, expresses that Jesus at birth did not open the vulva of Mary, as do other people, for He kept shut the gate of his mother's virginity, as prophesied by Ezekiel with the gate shut for ever, through which the Lord enters and exits.³⁷ For this reason, this power of exiting without opening the gate and leaving it shut after the exit demonstrates that one can call Christ—even before being conceived— *Holy and Son of God*, as he was declared by the corroborating testimony of God the Father and the Holy Spirit.³⁸

In that same century Theotecnos, bishop of Livias in Palestine, in a laudatory oration on the Assumption, after highlighting several prophecies of the Old Testament that foreshadowed the Virgin Mary under various symbolic figures, including the shut eastern gate of Ezekiel, concludes by stating that all these prophetic figures mean that Christ was born of Mary preserving her virginity.³⁹

34 Anonimus hymnographus, *Hymnus 12,1*, in *Ibid.*, 171.

35 Anonimus hymnographus, *Hymnus 15.5*, in *Ibid.*, 172-173.

36 "Vidit stupendi partus nuptiale sigillum, vel potius mysticam clavim portae, quae Deum excepit, quam Verbum subiit sine carne, et ex qua exiens cum carne, ipsam ianuam, uti invenerat, bene obsignatam reliquit." (Georgius Pisida, *Hexaemeron*. 1800-1804. PG 92, 1572).

37 "Nedum enim natus non aperuit vulvam pro more reliquorum hominum, quin etiam clausam virginitatis portam reliquit, juxta quod propheta Ezechiel dixit: *Et dixit mihi Dominus: Fili hominis, porta haec clausa erit. Nemo per eam ingreditur, et egreditur: et erit clausa.*" (Leontius Neapolitanus, *Sermo in Simeonem*. PG 93, 1574).

38 "Qua ergo ratione in iis constituta qui aperiunt, in eo possint procedere, qui non aperuit, sed clausam portam reliquit? Ac neque nunc primum opus habebit sanctum appellari, quod ante etiam conceptionem, *Sanctum, ac Dei Filius*, cum Patris, tum Spiritus sancti testimonio, fuit declaratum." (*Ibid.*).

39 Theotecnos, *Encomium Assumptionis sanctae Deiparae*, in Álvarez Campo, ed. *Corpus Marianum Patristicum*, 1979, Vol. 4/2, 371-382.

Toward the end of the 7th century Anastasios of Sinai (ca. 630-*post* 700), abbot of Saint Catherine's Monastery at Mount Sinai, exposing one of his dogmatic questions begins by noting that the prophetic vision of the gold candelabrum carrying seven candels means the virginal conception of the incarnate Word of God, because the candelabrum means the incarnate Son of God who comes to bring the light; and the fact that it is made of gold means that his mother Mary remained virgin after childbirth.⁴⁰ Then after writing out the prophecy of Ezekiel on the shut east-facing gate through which only the Lord entered and exited, Anastasios clarifies that this gate means the maternal uterus, as Job testifies when complaining to God why He did not shut the gates of his mother's womb.⁴¹

Two or three decades later St. Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople (ca. 650/60-ca.730/33), in a sermon on the Presentation of Mary to the temple, proclaims that today –that is to say, at this early consecration of the Virgin to the Lord– the open gate of the divine temple (in Jerusalem) receives the one who enters through it as the shut eastern gate of Emmanuel.⁴² The Constantinopolitan prelate then asserts that Ezekiel, by the revelation of the Spirit of God, narrates the praises of the east-facing gate of the temple and that, remaining shut, allows the passage of God;⁴³ he concludes that then the gates (of the temple of Jerusalem) are open to receive the spiritual gate (Mary) of God Emmanuel, and they are sanctified with the footsteps of Mary.⁴⁴

At the beginning of the 8th century the hymnographer and homilist St. Andrew of Crete (ca. 660-ca. 740), bishop of Gortyn (Crete), mentions in an oration on the birth of Mary that she, the Mother of God, is the common refuge of all Christians and the gate of Heaven, through which only the Lord of Heaven passed, not granting the passage through it to anyone else before or after.⁴⁵ In

40 Anastasios Sinaita, *Quaestiones. Quaestio XLIX*. PG 89, 607.

41 “Dicit enim: ‘Haec porta erit clausa, et nemo intrabit per eam’; sed Dominus solus intrabit et sedebit, quoniam ipse est dux, et egredietur et claudet portam post se. Quod autem uterus sit porta, testatur Iob, dicens: ‘Cur non conclusisti portas uteri matris meae?’” (*Ibid.*).

42 “Hodie patefacta divini templi porta obsignatam illam et ad orientem versam Emmanuelis portam ingredientem excipit.” (Germanus Constantinopolitanus, *In Praesentationem SS. Deiparae. Sermo I.2*. PG 98, 291).

43 “Adesdum, Ezechiel altiloquus, vivifici Spiritus a Deo datum volumen tenens, atque illius portae laudes enarra, quae ad orientem respicit, quaeque, obsignata manens, transitum Deo praebet.” (*Ibid.*, 298).

44 “Tum portae, ut spiritualem Emmanuelis Dei portam excipiant, panduntur, et pressum Mariae vestigiis limen sanctificantur.” (*Ibid.*, 299).

45 “Haec Maria Dei Genitrix est, commune Christianorum omnium perfugium [...] Coelorum porta, per quam solus transivit coelorum Dominus, nimini ante postve pervium concedens ingressum. ‘Haec Maria Dei Genitrix est, commune Christianorum omnium perfugium [...] Coelorum porta, per quam solus transivit coelorum Dominus, nimini ante postve pervium concedens ingressum.’” (Andreas

another sermon on the Annunciation this author proclaims that Mary is truly blessed, for, as prophesied by Ezekiel, she is the shut gate through which only God passes, and which will be again shut.⁴⁶

In his *Oration 12 on the Dormition of Mary*, Andrew of Crete affirms that she is, among other values, the dignity of the royal, celestial gender, the Levitical rod of Aaron, the root of Jesse, the east gate of Christ, who was born of a high Orient (God the Father).⁴⁷ And in another oration on the same Marian event, this author recalls once again that Mary was prophesied by Isaiah when saying that a Virgin will conceive in her womb, and that a stem will spring from the root of Jesse, from which a flower would blossom; and she also was prophesied by Ezekiel when proclaiming her as the shut east gate through which only the Lord would enter and pass, remaining then shut forever.⁴⁸

More or less at the same years the influential theologian and polygraph St. John of Damascus (675-749), in a sermon on the Annunciation, dedicates to Mary three metaphorical praises for her perpetual virginity: for being the only Virgin of virgins, because she remained a virgin before childbirth, at childbirth and after childbirth; for being the only shut gate between the gates; and for being the only city provided with defensive towers between all cities.⁴⁹

In the first homily on the birth of the Virgin, the Damascene says that today the gates of the sterility (her sterile mother Anna) have been opened, and the divine and the virginal gate (Mary) was born, from which and through which God who is above all entered the world in the form of a body.⁵⁰ And a little later this writer points out with greater precision:

Today this East-facing gate has been raised, through which Christ enters and exits; and it will be a shut gate, in which Christ is installed, the gate of the sheep,

Cretensis, *Oratio IV. In sanctam Nativitatem praesantae Dominae nostrae Dei Genitricis, semperque virginis Mariae*. PG 97, 867-870).

46 “Vere benedicta tu, quam Ezechiel *Orientem* praenuntiavit, ‘et portam clausam, per quam Deus solus transeat, et quae iterum clausa maneat’.” (Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio V. In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae nostrae Annuntiationem*. PG, 97, 899).

47 Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio XII. In Dormitionem sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae nostrae*. PG 97, 1070.

48 Andreas Cretensis, *Oratio XIII. In sanctissimae Deiparae Dominae nostrae Dormitionem*. PG 97, 1095.

49 “Salvesis, sola inter virgines Virgo, quae ante partum, et in partu, et post partum, virgo permansisti. Salvesis, e portis sola porta clausa, et sola e civitatibus civitas turribus munita.” (Iohannes Damascenus, *Sermo in Annuntiationem sanctissimae Dominae nostrae Dei Genitricis*. PG 96, 654-655).

50 Iohannes Damascenus, *Homilia in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*, 3. PG 96, 663.

whose name is Orient, through whom we had access to the Father, principle of light.⁵¹

And, while in the same homily, in one of whose excerpts he praises the bodily organs of the Virgin Mary, the Damascene designates her as “the gate of God resplendent with perpetual virginity”,⁵² in a second sermon on the same Marian feast he insists in praising Mary with the symbolic figure of Ezekiel: “Hail, gate facing East, from which the Orient of life [Christ] ruined the sunset of the men’s death.”⁵³

Finally, in his first homily on the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, St. John of Damascus, noting that Mary gave birth without semen, and after childbirth remained virgin, brings up the prophecy of Ezekiel on the shut gate, passable for the Lord, though not open. This intuitive prophecy shows undoubtedly that Mary is this shut gate, and, when passing through it after becoming incarnate, the Almighty God did not open at all the gate of virginity, so that the virginal seal remains in perpetuity.⁵⁴

Toward the middle of the 8th century the theologian and bishop John of Euboea asserts poetically that, “without needing human hands, the palace of the King of heaven has been built, and this palace in Paradise has an east-facing gate, and nobody, except God alone, passes through that gate, and it will be a shut gate.”⁵⁵

By the end of the 8th century or beginning of the 9th St. Epiphanius the Monk, in a sermon in honor of the Virgin, affirms that Mary had the virginity and continence, but not with temptations such as other women, having these virtues by nature, as a unique and extraordinary privilege above other women.⁵⁶ Such a

51 “Hodie porta illa ad orientem posita, exstructa est, per quam Christus ingreditur et egreditur: et erit clausa porta, in qua Christus ostium ovium, cuius nomen Oriens; per quem accessum ad Patrem luminis principium habuimus.” (Iohannes Damascenus, *Homilia in Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*, 4. PG 96, 666).

52 *Ibid.*, 675.

53 “Ave, porta ad orientem spectans, ex qua vitae oriens mortis occasum hominibus imminuit”. (Iohannes Damascenus, *Homilia II In Nativitatem B.V. Mariae*, 7. PG 96, 691).

54 “Nonne ipsa es, quae nullo semine suscepto peperisti, ac rursus virgo permansisti. Veniat divinissimus Ezechiel, clausamque portam ostendat, Domino perviam, nec tamen apertam, quemadmodum prophetico instinctu praenuntiavit. Dicta sua eventu comprobata monstret. Te dubio procul ostendet, per quam transiens, qui super omnia Deus est, assumpta carne, virginitatis portam nequaquam aperuit. Signaculum quippe in aeternum perseverat.” (Iohannes Damascenus, *Homilia I in Dormitionem B.V. Mariae*, 9. PG 96, 714).

55 “Ecce sine manibus hominum construitur palatium coelestis regis, et hoc palatium in Eden ad orientem portam habet, et nemo per eam portam ingreditur, nisi solus Dominus Deus; et erit porta clausa.” (Joannis Euboeensis, *Sermo in Conceptionem Sanctae Deiparae*, XVII. PG 96, 1487).

56 Epiphanius Monachus, *Sermo de Vita Sanctissimae Deiparae et de ipsius annis*. PG 120, 198.

privilege is precisely what, according to this monk, means the prophecy of Ezekiel on the gate always shut through which only God enters and leaves, keeping it shut forever.⁵⁷

Toward the middle of the 9th century the Sicilian liturgical poet Joseph the Hymnographer (ca. 816-886), in a canon in honor of Mary asks her to rejoice for being the only gate by which only God passed, who destroyed with his delivery the locks and the gates of Hell; she, being very worthy of all praise, is the divine entrance of all who are saved.⁵⁸ In another Marian hymn, after praising her as “the Gate of grace, that opened the gates of heaven to the mortals”, he asks her to open to himself the gates of penance and release him from the gates of death.⁵⁹ In another similar canticle he calls Mary “the inviolate”, designated by the prophet Ezekiel as the gate not accessible to anyone and by which only the Creator passed, leaving it shut, as it was before the delivery.⁶⁰ In a new hymn the holy bard of Sicily prays the Virgin that, in her condition of gate through which nobody has access, to open to him the gates of the penance and direct him toward the straight roads.⁶¹

In another liturgical poem Joseph the Hymnographer labels Mary “a gate *inaccessible* (in the metaphorical sense of “without sexual access”), which leads to God”; the he insists in asking her to open the gates of penance to him, erasing the stains of his sins with her mercy, before asking her, being herself “the gate of God”, to display the divine entrances to his miserable soul, through which he can enter by means of the confession and the absolution of his sins.⁶² In another Marian poem he points out that Ezekiel saw her (being the Mother of God) as the gate by which the sun of glory (Jesus) passed, who snatched the man from corruption;⁶³ then the lyrical hymnographer invokes Mary in these devoted terms:

57 “Atque hoc illud est, quod ab Ezechiele propheta dictum fuit: Erit porta orientalis clausa, et nemo transibit per eam, nisi Dominus Deus Israelis: ipse solus ingreditur, et egreditur per eam: et erit porta clausa.” (Ibid.).

58 “Tu, Domina, porta unica, per quam Verbum solum pertransibit; quae vectes et portas inferni partu tuo contrivisti, gaude: gaude, divinus introitus eorum qui salvantur, o omni laude dignissima. »“ (Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. I. Ad Hymnum Acathiston, In sanctissimam Deiparam Canon VI*. PG 105, 1019-1022).

59 Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. Theotocia seu Deiparae Strophae*. PG 105, 1067.

60 “Sacratissimus propheta portam te vocat, o inviolata, per quam nulli patet aditus, et solus Creator transivit, sicut ipse solus novit, relinquens eam clausam quemadmodum erat ante partum.” (Ibid., 1070).

61 “O porta, per quam nulli transitus patet, poenitentiae portas, o casta, aperi mihi, et in vias rectas dirige me.” (Ibid., 1103).

62 Ibid., 1153)

63 “Portam te vidit Ezechiel, o Deipara, per quam transivit Sol gloriae, qui hominem a corruptione eripuit: quem deprecare pro redemptione servorum tuorum.” (Ibid., 1163-1164).

Oh shut gate of God, by which only the Lord passed! Take me to the divine paths, and open the gates of salvation to me, oh the most beloved of God! In you I shelter, oh Virgin, the only protection of the human race.⁶⁴

In many other Marian canticles Joseph the Hymnographer asks Mary –whom he names “healthy gate, bridge leading to God, protectress of Christians, the most chaste Madam”— to govern him in the middle of the calamities and the cries of life;⁶⁵ besides he clears up that the prophets called symbolically the Virgin Mary “gate, and mount, and holy tabernacle: cloud of light, of which the Sun was born, the only giver of light [Jesus] for those who sit in the darkness and shadow”.⁶⁶ In another poem the Sicilian bard qualifies the Virgin as “the most pure”, “shining gate” (revealed to Ezekiel), that “gave birth in an ineffable way to the giver of the light, made like us”,⁶⁷ whereas in other verses he summons Mary with these expressive praises: “Oh gate of those who succeed in the salvation by faith! Oh gate by which only one who became incarnate for love to us has passed! Open the gates of the justice to those who praise thee faithfully.”⁶⁸

In other hymns in honor of the Virgin, Joseph the Hymnographer urges the believer to celebrate with praises the heavenly gate through which all sinners have access to indulgence;⁶⁹ and he asks the inviolate Virgin –being herself the gate revealed to Ezekiel by which the Lord passed in a prodigious way— to open the gates of penance to him.⁷⁰ In another song this poet synthesizes thus a set of biblical figures with which the exegetes traditionally identify the Virgin:

Oh pure, we call you an impassable gate, and field unploughed; and ark that contains the manna, and urn, and candelabrum, and censer of immaterial coal, oh pure! Oh chaste, we praise you, only Virgin that gives birth, preserving incorrupt your vulva: Lord's throne, gate, and mount; spiritual chandelier, the

64 “O porta Dei clausa, per quam solus Dominus transivit; deduc me in semitas divinas, et salutis portas aperi mihi, o Deo charissima: ad te enim confugio, o Virgo, unicum generis humani praesidium.” (Josephus Hymnographus, *Theotocia Ex Paracletica Graecorum*. PG 105, 1363).

65 Josephus Hymnographus, *Theotocia Ex Paracletica Graecorum*. PG 105, 1375.

66 “Sacrae prophetarum voces te praedicant symbolice, o Virgo, portam, et montem, et tabernaculum sanctum: lucis nubem, ex qua sedentibus in tenebris et umbra exortus est sol, unicus lucis dator.” (*Ibid.*).

67 “Te lucis portam fulgidam vidit Propheta, o purissima: lucis enim datorem nobis similem factum ineffabili ratione peperisti, quem superexaltamus in universa saecula.” (*Ibid.*, 1379).

68 “O janua eorum, qui per fidem salutem consequuntur: o porta per quam solus ille pertransivit, qui propter nos incarnatus est; aperi nobis portas justitiae, qui te fideliter collaudamus.” (Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. Theotocia Ex Paracletica Graecorum*. PG 105, 1299).

69 *Ibid.*, 1326.

70 “De portam praevidit te propheta, o Virgo inviolata, per quam ipse, modo sibi tantum noto, transivit. Ideo tibi supplico, ut ipsa poenitentia portas aperias mihi.” (*Ibid.*, 1335).

most refulgent nuptial chamber of God, tabernacle in which the glory is manifested; ark, urn, and altar.⁷¹

In an umpteenth poem Joseph the Hymnographer praises the Virgin Mary in these terms:

Mother of God, we call you the Spiritual Gate of the Light, through which Christ, appearing beautiful with the splendours of the divinity, entered next to us, hidden under the stole of flesh, invisible as God, but visible with our human form.⁷²

In that same 9th century the bishop George of Nicomedia, in a writing about the conception of Mary, states that, in being fixed with this conception the King's gate by which no one else can pass, also Who will pass through it (Jesus) is prepared, making thus beforehand passable to us the gates of heaven.⁷³

Finally, at the beginning of the 10th century, Peter, bishop of Argos († *post* 922), in a homily on the conception of the Virgin, says that the east-facing gate whose access, according to Ezekiel, is reserved only for Christ, is built at the very moment of the Mary's begetting.⁷⁴

CONCLUSIONS

Since the early 4th century, and for at least a millennium, a very large group of Church Fathers and medieval theologians of Greek and Latin Church placed special emphasis on interpreting the doctrinal meanings of the shut eastern gate of the temple that the prophet Ezekiel foresaw in a revelation.

This article, restricted in its research focus solely to the field of Greek-Eastern Patrology from 5th to 10th century, highlights an eloquent unanimity of opinions in all these authors when interpreting the aforementioned excerpt from Ezekiel in

71 Josephus Hymnographus, *Mariale. Theotocia Sive Allocutiones ad beatam Virginem Deiparam*. PG 105, 1406.

72 "Portam spiritualemente Lucis te, Dei Mater, nominamus, per quam ingressus est ad nos Christus speciosus apparens splendoribus divinitatis, occultatus in stola carnis, invisibilis ut Deus, in forma autem nostra visibilis." (*Ibid.*, 1411).

73 "Cum hodie figitur Regis porta, per quam nulli transitus patet; ei quidem, mirabili quadam ac cogitata maiore ratione, per eam transituro, praeparatur; nobis autem pervias coeli portas praeve efficit." (Georgius Nicomediensis, *Oratio I. In oraculum conceptionis S. Deiparae*. PG 100, 1338).

74 "Cum hodie figitur Regis porta, per quam nulli transitus patet; ei quidem, mirabili quadam ac cogitata maiore ratione, per eam transituro, praeparatur; nobis autem pervias coeli portas praeve efficit." (Petrus Argorum Episcopus, *In Conceptionem S. Annae Oratio*, 7. PG 104, 1362).

a simultaneously Mariological and Christological key, which consolidated thus a continuous and concordant exegetical and dogmatic tradition on the matter.

In fact, all these ecclesiastical writers of the Greek-Eastern Church promote, one after the other with obsessive insistence, two fundamental, complementary interpretations. First of all, the Ezekiel's sentence, by which God entered and exited, without opening it, through the east gate of the temple, which was shut and should remain shut, means Jesus' conception (He entered through the gate) and birth (He exited by the gate) of Mary's virginal womb (the gate was shut and remained shut in both cases without being violated). Second, the prophet's statement according to which "This gate is to remain shut. It will not be opened. No man is to enter through it, because the Lord God of Israel entered through it, so it is to remain shut", is unanimously interpreted by all those ecclesiastical writers as a clear confirmation of Mary's perpetual virginity, for no man—nor even her husband Joseph—will ever have intercourse with her, after the incarnate Son of God entered (was conceived) and exited (was delivered) through her. Both concordant interpretations are summarized in the consolidated dogmatic tradition of the Greek-Eastern and Latin Church according to which Mary was a virgin before childbirth, virgin in childbirth, and virgin forever after childbirth.

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